



Bridging the Digital Gender Divide for Peace and Development in Nigeria: Challenges, Policies, and Collaborative Solutions for Sustainable Peace

Mariya Shuaibu Suleiman

Peace-builder and Journalist, Nigeria

Corresponding author: mariashuaibu234@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

There is a persistent gender digital divide in Nigeria which has profound impact on peace and development. Despite a substantial internet user base, disparities persist, particularly affecting women in rural areas. This paper draws on USAID-provided statistics to highlight the existing gender gap in mobile phone ownership, internet usage, and smartphone access. Despite governmental and organizational efforts, challenges such as cultural norms, limited educational opportunities, and biases hinder progress. The paper tries to capture the possible solutions to bridge this gender digital divide which could include targeted awareness campaigns, cultural sensitivity initiatives, infrastructure development, and industry collaboration as essential steps to bridge the gap. Additionally, promoting girls' education, ensuring equal access to technology, and empowering women economically can be the possible ways to empower girls and women to contribute to social cohesion and development. Collaboration between government bodies, civil society organizations, and community groups is crucial for sustainable change.

Keywords: Internet, smartphone, technology, civil society organizations, community groups, rural areas

The global discourse on gender equality has gained momentum, emphasizing the need to address disparities in various sectors, including Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for promoting peace and development of the country. This paper focuses on the pervasive gender digital divide in Nigeria and its implications for peace and development. Despite Nigeria's significant internet user base, gender disparities persist, particularly impacting women's access to digital resources, especially in rural areas thereby challenging the peace and development of the state.

Gender Digital Divide in Nigeria

The gender digital divide in Nigeria is evident in

statistics provided by USAID in 2023, indicating disparities in mobile phone ownership, internet usage, and smartphone access. The gap in mobile internet use has widened in recent years, with women experiencing a decline in technology use, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital gender gap poses challenges to the peace and development and social and economic progress in Nigeria, despite efforts by the government and organizations like Search for Common Ground

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(SFCG), Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), etc.

Gender digital divide refers to the gap between men and women concerning access to, use of, and impact of information and communication technologies (ICT). In the context of peace and development, the gender digital divide encompasses disparities in digital access, skills, and participation that can have profound implications for social, economic, and political outcomes thereby causing unrest. However, to understand how the gender digital divide intersects with peace and development, we should look at the following factors:

- 1. Access to Information and Resources:** Most women have limited access to digital resources such as the internet, smartphones, and other ICT tools due to financial, family and environmental constraint. This hinders their ability to access critical information related to peace building, health, education, job opportunities, and civic engagement. This in turn limits their participation in developmental processes and lack of opportunities. Due to lack of information and access to technologies, the capacities of girls and women to use technology to get their needs like jobs, civil facilities and education is diminished. These can lead to conflict situations with people protesting against lack of fulfillment of their needs and dwindling opportunities. For instance, the Capital city of Plateau State, Jos has experience a series of conflicts triggered by such factors.
- 2. Economic Opportunities:** Women face barriers in participating in the digital economy including limited access to online job opportunities and entrepreneurship platform. This hinders them to participate in the digital spaces and sectors, thereby making them dependent and jobless that leads to personal unrest.
- 3. Education and Skill Development:** Gender disparities in digital literacy and access to educational resources can limit women's ability to acquire digital skills. For instance, in the evolving digital landscape, limited digital skills hinder women's educational and

professional advancement, impacting their capacity to actively contribute to development initiatives.

- 4. Participation in Decision-making:** The digital gender divide is leading to underrepresentation of women in digital spaces and technology related decision making processes. In development and peace-building efforts, excluding women from digital decision-making processes can lead to biased policies and neglect of women's perspectives, hindering inclusive and effective outcomes.
- 5. Safety and Security Online:** Most of the times, women face a higher risk of online harassment, cyber bullying, and digital violence. This can create a hostile online environment, deterring women from participating in digital spaces and limiting their engagement in discussions critical to peace building and development.
- 6. Health and Well-being:** The digital gender divide is leading to limited access to digital health resources and telemedicine. In times of crises or pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, restricted access to digital health information and services can adversely affect women's health and well-being, causing unrest and forcing them to live in bad situations.
- 7. Social Connectivity:** The divide is responsible for limited access to social media platforms and online communities. Women, who experience social isolation, may miss out on opportunities for networking, community building, and accessing support networks crucial for personal and community development.
- 8. Political Empowerment:** It is leading to underrepresentation of women in digital political spaces and online activism. The digital gender divide can reinforce existing gender inequalities in political participation, limiting women's ability to advocate for policy changes that promote peace and development.

Addressing the gender digital divide in the context of peace and development involves implementing policies and initiatives that promote digital inclusion, literacy, and equal opportunities for men and women. Bridging this divide contributes to more

equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development outcomes.

Challenges and Barriers

In an expansive interview of about 25 women and girls which the author did for the paper, more than 80 per cent of the respondents did not feel a sense of belonging in the community because of the various challenges that contribute to the gender digital gap in Nigeria. These includes limited access to technology, digital literacy skills, gender biases, safety and security concerns, underrepresentation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), cultural and societal norms, and infrastructure limitations. These factors result in the under-representation and less participation of women in the ICT sector and hinder the effective implementation of existing policies, causing unrest and underdevelopment in the Nigeria, especially in conflict zones like Jos.

Existing Policies and Initiatives Not Enough

Several policies and initiatives have been implemented to address the gender digital gap, including: National ICT Policy, National Gender Policy, educational initiatives, digital inclusion programs, and the Girls in ICT Initiative. Despite these efforts, the USAID report (2022) indicates that a wider gender disparity still exists in the ICT sector.

Policy Recommendations

To address the issue and bridge the digital gender divide for peace and development in Nigeria, the implementation of effective policies is crucial. The respondents whom the author interviewed suggested some policies to be implemented to achieve the specific goals:

National ICT Policy: Establish and enforce an inclusive National ICT Policy that promotes equal access to ICT resources and opportunities for all genders. This will go a long way in maintaining peaceful atmosphere in the society and develop specific strategies within the policy to address

and bridge the digital gender divide, focusing on eliminating disparities in access, usage, and impact of information and communication technologies.

National Gender Policy: Strengthen the implementation of the National Gender Policy, emphasizing gender mainstreaming in all sectors, including ICT and ensuring that the policy addresses challenges specific to women, both in urban and rural areas, by promoting equal opportunities and access in the digital realm. This would make women feel sense of belonging in the society and thereby contribute their best towards the development of the nation.

Educational Initiatives: Introduce and support educational initiatives that encourage girls' participation in STEM education and implement programs to break down gender stereotypes and create a conducive and peaceful environment for girls to pursue ICT-related careers.

Digital Inclusion Programs: Develop and implement digital inclusion programs to bridge the urban-rural digital divide and support initiatives like the '2023 Digital Policy Leadership Training for Young Women' organized by CITAD to build the capacity of young women, especially in underserved regions.

Girls in ICT Initiative: Strengthen and expand the 'Girls in ICT Initiative' to encourage young girls to pursue careers in ICT through mentorship programs, workshops, and scholarships and collaborate with educational institutions and private organizations to create pathways for girls interested in ICT fields.

Gender Equality Laws: Advocate for and enforce laws that promote gender equality in the ICT sector. Ensure that existing laws protect women against any form of discrimination and harassment in digital spaces, including cyber-bullying.

Safety and Security Measures: Enforce regulations that protect the safety and security of women and girls in digital spaces, addressing risks of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and collaborate with law enforcement agencies and social media platforms to ensure effective implementation of safety measures.

Political Representation: Implement policies that promote increased female representation in political and decision-making positions and introduce temporary quota systems to address the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within the ICT sector.

Cultural Sensitivity Initiatives: Develop policies that promote cultural sensitivity in the ICT sector, challenging and changing harmful cultural norms and stereotypes, and encourage collaboration with local communities and influencers to integrate cultural awareness programs within ICT initiatives.

Data Collection and Monitoring: Finally, integrate gender-disaggregated data collection and monitoring mechanisms within the existing policies and ensure regular evaluation and reporting to track progress and identify areas that require targeted interventions. This will go a long way in ensuring the peace, stability and the development of Nigeria.

The respondents felt these policies, when effectively implemented, can contribute significantly to bridging the digital gender divide in Nigeria, fostering peace, and promoting sustainable development. Collaboration between government bodies, civil society organizations, and community groups is essential for the successful execution of these policies.

The Way Forward for Sustainable Peace and Development

Bridging the digital gender divide for peace and development in Nigeria also requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. According to the respondents, the following strategies similar to the aforementioned policies recommended could be given cognizance to achieve desirable results:

- ⊙ *Increase awareness and education:* Launch targeted awareness campaigns to inform women, especially in rural areas, about existing policies and the benefits of ICT.
- ⊙ Integrate digital literacy programs into formal and informal education systems, ensuring they are localized in all states.
- ⊙ *Cultural Sensitivity:* Collaborate with local communities and influencers to challenge gender stereotypes and promote the cultural acceptance of women in the ICT sector.
- ⊙ Engage in dialogues with community and religious leaders to foster an understanding of the importance of gender equality in digital spaces and their equal participation in peace building and sustainable development.
- ⊙ *Infrastructure Development:* Invest in expanding ICT infrastructure in underserved areas, ensuring that women in rural communities have equal access to digital resources.
- ⊙ Promote public-private partnerships to accelerate infrastructure development in both urban and rural areas.
- ⊙ *Industry Collaboration:* Foster collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society organizations to create mentorship programs, scholarships, and skill-building initiatives for women in ICT.
- ⊙ Encourage companies to implement inclusive workplace policies that support women's professional development in the tech industry.
- ⊙ *Promote Girls' Education:* Implement policies and programs that encourage and enable girls to enroll and stay in school, addressing barriers such as early marriage, cultural biases, and inadequate infrastructure.
- ⊙ Develop mentorship programs for girls interested in STEM fields, providing guidance and support for pursuing ICT-related careers.
- ⊙ *Digital Literacy:* Promote digital literacy among women to bridge the digital gender gap, offering workshops and training programs that enhance educational and economic opportunities.
- ⊙ Provide accessible information and communication technologies to empower women with the skills needed for digital participation.
- ⊙ *Ensure Safety and Security of Women and Girls in Digital Spaces:* Enforce laws and regulations that protect women against cyberbullying and online harassment.

- ⊙ Collaborate with social media platforms to implement effective measures against gender-based violence in digital spaces.
- ⊙ *Economic Empowerment*: Implement empowerment programs to support women in digital spaces, offering training, funding, and resources for female entrepreneurs.
- ⊙ Advocate for equal employment opportunities and equal pay for equal work for women in the ICT sector.
- ⊙ **Women Inclusion in Policy Formulation**: Provide opportunities for women to participate in policy formulation and decision-making processes concerning ICT.
- ⊙ Advocate for gender-sensitive policies that promote women's inclusion and representation in the digital sector so that they can contribute to the development process.
- ⊙ *Political Representation*: Implement temporary quota systems to increase female representation in political and decision-making positions, breaking the cycle of underrepresentation.
- ⊙ *Cultural Awareness and Engagement*: Use mass media to enlighten people on the significance of women's inclusion in the ICT sector and their critical contribution to peace building and development.
- ⊙ Engage community and religious leaders to promote gender equality and challenge harmful cultural norms perpetuating gender inequality.
- ⊙ *Data Collection and Monitoring*: Ensure data collection and monitoring mechanisms are in place to analyze gender-disaggregated data, track progress, and identify areas that need targeted interventions in the ICT sector.

CONCLUSION

From the in-depth interviews conducted and the analysis of different available literature in the field, it

can be underlined that addressing gender inequality in Nigeria's ICT sector requires collaborative efforts, encompassing policy reforms, educational initiatives, awareness campaigns, community engagements, and private sector involvement. Tailoring strategies to Nigeria's cultural and societal context, while drawing on successful experiences from other regions, is essential because it will give women a sense of belonging and happy and motivate them to contribute through a bigger canvas for peace and development of the nation.

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